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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000852

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SOCI PINR EAID CU
SUBJECT: U.S. ELECTIONS GENERATE INTENSE INTEREST IN CUBA

Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: As with many things about the U.S., Cubans were captivated by the U.S. election process this year. Even official media devoted significant time and space to covering the primary and final elections (until the final election itself was over that is). USINT hosted an election night event that attracted 200 people including civil society members, international press, the diplomatic corps and U.S. students studying in Cuba (and pointedly was boycotted by Cuban officials). Cubans held distinct views about who they thought should win: anecdotal evidence and a straw poll taken at the election night revealed mixed opinions. However, in the end, civil society groups are already pointing to the election of Barack Obama as a guide for Cuba itself. If such historic change is possible in the U.S., they argue, it should be possible in Cuba where it is needed even more. Official reaction to the election results has been muted so far, but will likely develop quickly as the GOC makes up its mind and seeks to set forth its position before a new administration can develop a response. End Summary

¶12. (C) Cuban contacts in the academic/intellectual community often tell us that they believe Cubans are more like Americans than any other nationality in the hemisphere, and that because of this when relations improve, ties will be renewed quickly across a wide range of social, religious, commercial, athletic, and cultural areas. Because of connections maintained with family members in the U.S. and access to pirated media from U.S. sources, Cubans follow developments in the U.S. every bit as closely, and sometimes more closely, than do U.S. citizens themselves. The historic presidential election of 2008 was no exception to this. Cubans were beside themselves with anticipation about what might transpire on November 4.

¶13. (C) Somewhat surprisingly, the official media covered the primary and final election processes quite closely, if not in a fair and balanced way. Official propaganda about why the candidacy of Barack Obama would never get off the ground had to be modified constantly to keep up with developments in the U.S. Still, some of the official analysis, especially that done by former CUBINT chief Ramon Sanchez Parodi, was as good as any being published in op-ed sections of U.S. newspapers. Nevertheless, in spite of banner headlines in Granma and Juventud Rebelde announcing the elections on the morning of November 4, the results were relegated to page 5 (of an 8 page newspaper) on November 5, and had virtually disappeared by November 6.

¶14. (C) In this atmosphere of anticipation, USINT hosted an Election Night event at the Chief of Mission Residence (COMR) and invited nearly 400 guests including members of the diplomatic corps; the international press; religious leaders; artists; a broad range of Cuban civil society members

including independent journalists and librarians; and a significant number of official Cubans, including staff from the foreign ministry (MINREX) and academics from universities and officially sanctioned institutions. We also invited a number of U.S. citizen students from colleges and universities who are studying for a semester in Cuba.

15. (C) In the end, more than 200 people attended the event. Notable by their absence were the 38 invited Cuban government officials and academics. Late on November 3, USINT received a dipnote from MINREX returning the invitations and accusing USINT of taking "provocative and threatening" measures by inviting official Cubans to an event where it was likely that "mercenaries" would be present. Artists and religious groups were very lightly represented, but the civil society people came out in force.

16. (C) Those present were an enthusiastic bunch. As part of the evening's presentation, USINT carried out a mock election open only to Cubans from outside the Section and the smattering of third country nationals. Results of the mock election were announced just after 1000 EST. Out of 93 votes cast, 51 went to John McCain, 39 to Barack Obama, and 3 voted for both. The straw poll vote contrasted with anecdotal information picked up in conversations throughout the evening that indicated strong support for the candidacy of Barack Obama. Dissident leader Oswaldo Paya came with almost his whole family and sat glued to the television most of the evening. While there, he and Afro-Cuban independent journalist Jorge Olivera did extensive on-air interviews with Radio Marti. Like many other Afro-Cubans in attendance, Olivera said the election of Obama was an historic event for Cuba too, since it gave hope to black Cubans who also are marginalized at the same time that it robbed the GOC of a propaganda weapon it has been using for 50 years. Even the staunchest supporters of Senator Obama also expressed great admiration for the concession speech delivered by Senator McCain, which they described as an example of how politics in a true democracy should work.

17. (C) Cuban civil society wasted little time in following up on the election. The organization of most of the liberal parties on the island, led by Hector Palacios and Francisco Chaviano, held a news conference early on November 5 to deliver a formal declaration on their views regarding U.S. policy toward Cuba and to present a letter to President-elect Obama (transmitted to WHA/CCA). The declaration called on the USG to lift restrictions on the travel of Cuban-American family members to the island, open up the transfer of remittances, and allow individual Cuban-Americans to support dissident groups directly. In answering press questions, Palacios complained (inaccurately) that none of the \$45 million in foreign assistance funding appropriated for Cuba for FY 2008 had reached anyone on the island yet. He said that some process needs to be devised to get these funds into the hands of those who want to build democracy, but also emphasized that opening remittances so that individuals on both sides of the Florida Straits can begin to get funds to Cubans at the grass roots level is even more important as it will be harder to stop and more effective in the long run.

18. (C) COMMENT: The very possibility that Barack Obama could be elected president of the United States had caused a sensation in Cuba, and his ultimate election has had a profound effect on all Cubans with whom we speak. Many cite President-elect Obama's call to lift travel restrictions and limits on remittances as a key reason they supported his candidacy. But a reflective Oswaldo Paya suggested late last week that Cubans simply long for change and that, unable to realize any change at home, they are reveling vicariously in the change taking place in the U.S. In spite of Fidel Castro's seeming praise of Obama in his November 3 "Reflecciones" piece, most Cubans believe the GOC is not pleased with the result and is uncertain as to how to respond. Just as the concept of change thrills ordinary Cubans, it threatens a regime that depends on maintenance of the status quo for its survival. Many of our contacts predict that the GOC will attempt to provoke some sort of

crisis with the U.S. over the next weeks or months in hopes of forcing a new Obama administration into a more conventional (and confrontational) stance vis a vis Cuba that is more to its liking. We agree that this is a prospect for which we must be prepared.

FARRAR